A New Way of Cooking Beets

Our simple method saves time, intensifies flavor, and even yields a beet-enriched sauce.

BY CELESTE ROGERS

Beets are packed with complex earthy sweetness, but preparing them is no small feat. Roasting them concentrates their flavor but can take more than 90 minutes—way too long for a weeknight side dish. Boiling might shave off time, but one taste of the earthy, sweet crimson cooking liquid proves that this convenience exacts its own toll. Not wanting to pour flavor down the drain or wait longer than an hour, I went in search of a more streamlined approach to bringing out the best in beets.

Most quick-cooking beet recipes begin by cutting the beets down to bite size. While this reduces the roasting time to less than a half-hour, peeling and cutting the rock-hard raw beets is a tedious and messy task. Part of the satisfaction of cooking beets whole (either roasting or boiling) is slipping their skins off post-cooking with the simple rub of a paper towel and easily slicing their softened flesh with a knife. I wanted the same easy technique—but faster.

I decided to turn to the epitome of speed and convenience: the microwave. But as it turns out, this is the wrong appliance for beets. When I pulled a tender batch from the microwave after 12 minutes, I found that their skins were impossible to remove without some arm strength and a vegetable peeler. This is because the microwave heats the outermost inch of food so fast that moisture in the beet flesh doesn't have time to evaporate and cause the flesh to shrink and separate slightly from the skin—the key to easy removal. And easy removal of the skins was a must.

I knew I would have to use a more traditional method, and boiling had the most potential for speed. I tried halving the raw beets before placing them in a large saucepan with about a quart of water to cover (turning a blind eye to any consequential flavor loss for now). This small investment in prep work cost less than a minute but shaved 10 to 15 minutes off the hour of cooking time typically required for whole beets. As an added benefit, the cooked beet halves cooled to handling temperature more quickly than whole beets and shed their peels just as easily under the pressure of my thumb and the gentle friction of a paper towel. Done.

My next step? I had to face the flavor lost to all that cooking water. Instead of sheepishly pouring the vibrant "beet broth" down the drain after cooking up my next batch, I decided that I would reduce it to about a tablespoon and use it to build a dressing for the beets—nothing wasted and no flavor lost. Unfortunately, reducing a quart of water took upwards of 25 minutes.

Braising the beets in a small amount of liquid creates the base for a flavorful sauce to finish the dish.

Not wanting to devote this much time to reduction, I tried cooking the beets in less liquid to begin with. A mere 1¼ cups was enough to submerge a small portion of each beet and provide ample steam. By reducing the amount of liquid, I effectively switched from boiling to braising, relying on a small amount of water to gently simmer and steam my beets in a tightly covered pot. For even braising, I needed to make certain that the beets were in a single layer, so I switched from a large saucepan to a broader covered straight-sided skillet. (A Dutch oven worked, too.) The beets finished cooking in the same time period and were just as tender, but now the leftover braising liquid reduced in just 5 minutes flat.

To play up the earthy sweetness of the beets and introduce a complementary acidity, I added a tablespoon of light brown sugar and 3 tablespoons of vinegar to the beet reduction. Just 1 more minute of cooking gave the resultant sweet-and-sour sauce enough body to coat the peeled wedges. Thin slices of shallot underscored the savory depth, while toasted nuts, aromatic citrus zest, and fresh herbs added just enough contrast without overshadowing the robust beet flavor I had worked so hard to preserve. As the self-proclaimed roasted beet lovers went back for seconds, I considered my work done. Armed with a simple method that cost me less than an hour, I was ready to add beets to my midweek vegetable roster.

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BEETS WITH LEMON AND ALMONDS

SERVES 4 TO 6

To ensure even cooking, we recommend using beets that are of similar size—roughly 2 to 3 inches in diameter. The beets can be served warm or at room temperature. If serving at room temperature, wait to sprinkle with almonds and herbs until right before serving. For our free recipe for Beets with Ginger and Cashews, go to CooksIllustrated.com/apr13.

- 1½ pounds beets, trimmed and halved horizontally
- 1¼ cups water
- Salt and pepper
- 3 tablespoons white vinegar
- 1 tablespoon packed light brown sugar
- 1 shallot, sliced thin
- 1 teaspoon grated lemon zest
- ½ cup whole almonds, toasted and chopped
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh mint
- 1 teaspoon chopped fresh thyme

1. Place beets, cut side down, in single layer in 11-inch straight-sided sauté pan or Dutch oven. Add water and ¼ teaspoon salt; bring to simmer over high heat. Reduce heat to low, cover, and simmer until beets are tender and tip of paring knife inserted into beets meets no resistance, 45 to 50 minutes.

2. Transfer beets to cutting board. Increase heat to medium-high and reduce cooking liquid, stirring occasionally, until pan is almost dry, 5 to 6 minutes. Add vinegar and sugar; return to boil; and cook, stirring constantly with heat-resistant spatula, until spatula leaves wide trail when dragged through glaze, 1 to 2 minutes. Remove pan from heat.

3. When beets are cool enough to handle, rub off skins with paper towel or dish towel and cut into ½-inch wedges. Add beets, shallot, lemon zest, ½ teaspoon salt, and ¼ teaspoon pepper to glaze and toss to coat. Transfer beets to serving dish; sprinkle with almonds, mint, and thyme; and serve.

BEETS WITH LIME AND PEPITAS

Omit thyme. Substitute lime zest for lemon zest, toasted pepitas for almonds, and cilantro for mint.

BEETS WITH ORANGE AND WALNUTS

Substitute orange zest for lemon zest; walnuts, toasted and chopped, for almonds; and parsley for mint.